

# A SHOUT-OUT FOR SHARPTAILS

Let's give a big hand for the state's prairie game bird pioneer.

BY E. DONNALL THOMAS, JR.

As usual when I'm heading afield with shotgun and bird dogs, the terrain defines the promise of the day ahead. On this early September morning, a cloudless azure sky stretching horizon to horizon reminds me why the words Big Sky are so often used to describe Montana. A panorama of undulating hills suggests slow-rolling waves at sea. Each rounded ridge lies separated from its neighbor by a coulee steep enough but not quite deep enough to qualify as a canyon. Though the regional term coulee derives from the French verb *couloir*, to flow, there is no water in these ravines. However, the green chokecherry and buffaloberry along their flanks contrast sharply with the sea of gold and brown surrounding them, suggesting that at some point they enjoyed moisture denied the rest of the prairie.

Ungrazed by cattle, the native grasses on the open ground stand nearly to my knee, high enough to hold game birds feeding on berries and grasshoppers. There's so much of it though, and even with two eager German wire-haired pointers ranging ahead of me and my wife, Lori, we'll likely cover lots of ground before our first contact with game. The alternative is to hunt the brushy coulees, which can concentrate birds. But we don't expect to find any there until the day's rising temperatures send them in search of shade. ▶▶

JOSHUA RUTLEDGE



**SEASONAL ATTIRE** The male sharp-tail's bright yellow eye combs and lavender air sacs are visible when the birds are mating in March and April. But during hunting season, the males are more subtly colored and barely distinguishable from females.

After several minutes of thought, I decide we should hunt the open, grassy ridgetop a mile uphill toward the head of the first coulee. Then, if we don't find birds along the way, we'll descend and battle the brush and steep sidehills back to the truck.

Inevitably, this carefully devised stragem earns a comment from Lori. "You always come up with a plan," she says as she breaks her 20-gauge open and drops a shell into each chamber. "I just wish more of them worked."

So do I.

#### MY FAVORITE BIRD

Montana's open grassland habitat offers wing-shooters a choice of several prized game birds. Ring-necked pheasants are the largest, noisiest, most colorful, and smartest. Gray partridge (commonly called Hungarian partridge or Huns) offer fast, tricky shooting and wonderful opportunities for pointing dogs to hold a point. Theoretically, we might encounter one or both in the inviting habitat ahead (though the pheasant season opener is still a few weeks off), but today I'm focused on my favorite Montana upland bird, the sharp-tailed grouse. (Note: I don't hunt sage-grouse because I find they are too easy to shoot on the wing, don't taste good to me,

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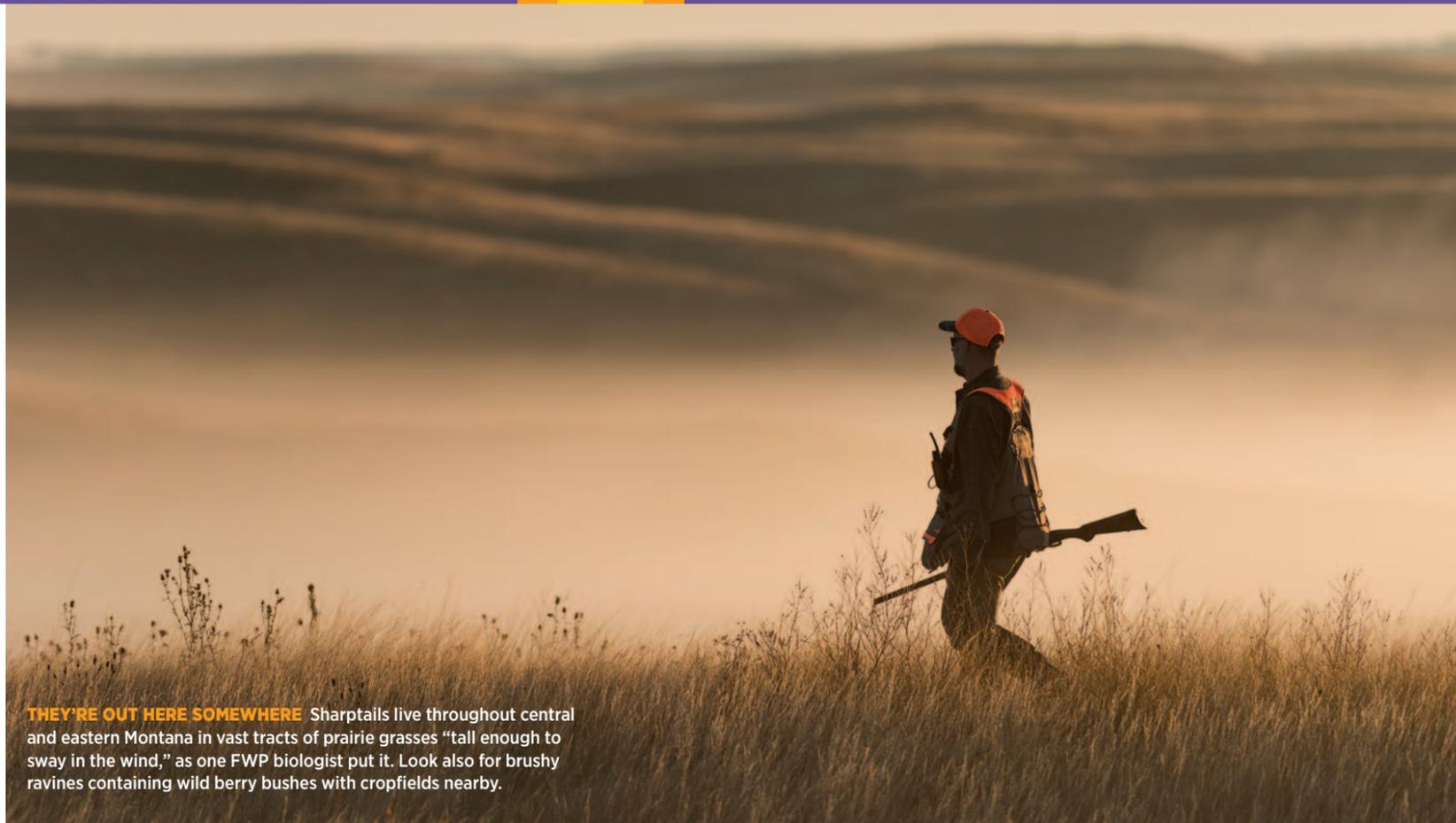
and I'm concerned about the species' future.)

Because of their size and shape, sharptails are often called "chickens" by locals, though true prairie chickens of the central Midwest do not live here. Dressed in mottled brown, black, and buff, a sharptail may seem drab compared to a rooster pheasant, but a closer look reveals a subtly beautiful bird with complex patterns of white spots on the wings and delicate, arrowhead-shaped markings on its breast. The plumage provides superb camouflage to help the bird avoid coyotes, hawks, and other predators.

Gregarious by nature, sharptails are seldom found alone. During September, they commonly live in family groups of perhaps a dozen birds. It's hard to know just what to call these early season groups. Too small to be flocks, their numbers are consistent with coveys, but they do not demonstrate true covey behavior such as flushing simultaneously like bobwhite quail or gray partridges. I call them "bunches." By the time snow starts to accumulate in

November, sharptails often coalesce into large, loosely formed flocks.

One of my reasons for admiring sharptails above all other prairie game birds is that they have lived in this part of North America for thousands of years. Pheasants and gray partridges were introduced to this region in the late 1800s and early 1900s, respectively.



**THEY'RE OUT HERE SOMEWHERE** Sharptails live throughout central and eastern Montana in vast tracts of prairie grasses "tall enough to sway in the wind," as one FWP biologist put it. Look also for brushy ravines containing wild berry bushes with cropfields nearby.

## Watching the spring spectacle

Oddly, there is only one established sharptail lek viewing blind in all of Montana—at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge north of Great Falls. The refuge holds a lottery each day to see who gets access to the viewing site. Details are at [fws.gov/refuge/benton-lake/species](https://fws.gov/refuge/benton-lake/species).

Another option is to drive the backroads of BLM grasslands at dawn in March or early April, watching for grouse on the ground or in the air. If you see a bunch of grouse, that's a lek, and you'll want to return near there (but not right on the lek) before sunrise the next morning.

Perhaps the easiest way to find an active lek is to contact a local FWP biologist and ask. If they know of any, they'll likely be happy to share the information as long as you promise not to spook the birds.

Newcomers should follow certain guidelines to avoid disrupting the mating process and harming the local grouse population. Arrive early, since birds are skittish in daylight. A lightweight portable blind will allow close observation and photographic opportunities. Or park no closer than 100 yards away and view from your vehicle. Never allow dogs to chase birds at or near a lek.



**BRING IT ON** The male sharp-tailed grouse's mating ritual is one of the great wildlife spectacles of the Great Plains. Vying for the attention of females, the males stomp, flutter, and pirouette at dawn, day after day.

**Locating birds in such dense, thorny cover is one thing, but getting them airborne is another. Since bird dogs are trained to hold a point without advancing, our only option is for one of us to wade in.**

Sharptails had been hunted here for millennia by Indigenous people by the time of first documented European contact with the species. That event that took place on September 12, 1804, in what is now South Dakota, when William Clark observed large numbers of fowl-like birds on the prairie. In a typical example of their astute wildlife observations, Meriwether Lewis, Clark's co-leader on the Voyage of Discovery, wrote that these "Sharpe-tailed Grows" (his spelling) had pointed tails with "the feathers in its center much longer than those on

the sides," thereby distinguishing them from the true prairie chickens they had encountered earlier.

Consistent with the bird's preference for prairie, the bulk of our sharptail population is found in eastern Montana. Isolated populations were historically present in Montana west of the Continental Divide but petered out by the early 2000s. (See "West Side Story," in the March-April 2022 *Montana Outdoors*, to learn about recent restoration efforts.)

#### DANCE PARTY

Hunters aren't the only ones enthusiastic about sharptails and committed to their preservation. Birders, photographers, and casual wildlife observers delight in watching the grouse perform their lively spring mating dances—at open areas known as leks—across the species' range. At first light in March or early April, sharptails of both sexes begin to gather from all directions at lekking sites, locations that tend to remain constant from year to year. Once enough participants have arrived at the party, the males begin to display for the largely indifferent hens, cooing and bowing with wings extended while shuffling and stomping in an elaborate sequence of dance steps.

Everyone interested in wildlife should witness this remarkable spectacle at least once (see sidebar on page 14).

The six weeks or so between Montana's grouse hunting season opener on September 1 and mid-October is the best period for hunting sharptails. Weather is usually pleasant, although hunters will have to carry adequate water for dogs and watch for rattlesnakes, and it can get so hot some years that any hunting past 10 a.m. is too hard on the dogs. Thicker ground cover at that time of year encourages birds to hold for pointing dogs. With pheasant season yet to open and attract additional hunters, hunting pressure is often light.

Late-season sharptail hunting is harder. Snow has knocked down cover, making it easier for the birds to spot approaching

## Finding sharptail hunting areas

Sharpies are found in every Montana county east of the Continental Divide. Look for large swaths of prairie grass "tall enough to sway in the wind," as one FWP wildlife biologist put it. Brushy ravines with stands of buffaloberry, Russian olive, or chokecherry near abundant rosehips and alfalfa, wheat, or barley fields also signal good sharptail habitat.

Knock on doors or phone to get permission to hunt productive-looking private land. Another option is to locate likely sharptail tracts enrolled in FWP's Block Management, Open Fields, and Conservation Lease programs; maps are available on the agency's website. You can also seek out remote tracts of Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, or state school trust lands, all of which can be hunted without obtaining permission.



A brace of birds for the table

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: NICK FUGCI, STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER, STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER



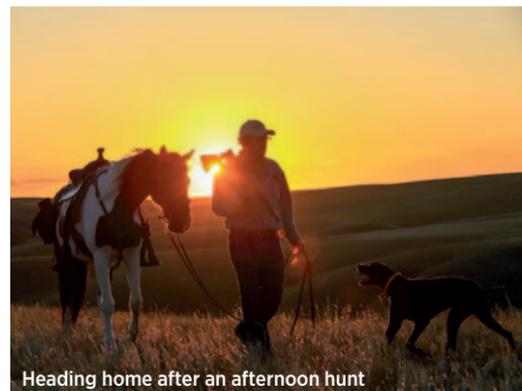
**ALERTED** After mid-October, sharptails bunch up and become harder to sneak up on. Often a sentry or two keeps an eye out for hunters and dogs. What's more, early season snows may knock down cover, making the birds warier than in September when they can hide in thick grass stands.

hunters and dogs and flush out of range. But there are far fewer hunters after Thanksgiving, so you'll have most areas all to yourself until the season ends on New Year's Day.

Years ago in northeastern Montana, I decided to make a quick solo hunt shortly after Christmas. Pheasants were my primary quarry, but when I drove past a stubble field and noticed large numbers of sharptails silhouetted against the snow, I couldn't resist. My plan was to park several hundred yards away, quietly get the dog out

of the truck, and sneak up on the birds. No dice. After parking and carefully exiting the pickup cab, I wasn't able to even reach the dog box before the distant sharptails began to flush, filling the air with the sound of wings and the birds' characteristic reedy alarm calls.

I'll bet more than 100 birds took to the air. The spectacle lasted several minutes as grouse took off and flew over the horizon in their typical flap-and-glide wingbeat pattern. I worked the perimeter of the field for stragglers but never fired a shot.



Heading home after an afternoon hunt



**RENEWAL** Once the hunting season ends on January 1, sharptails still must survive the prairie winter, where deep snows can cover spent grain and other foods. But if the birds can make it to March, they gather again for their spring mating ritual and rejuvenate the population.

### A PLAN PANS OUT

Back on the prairie in September, Lori and I reach the apex of the ridge without flushing a bird. As we start down over the edge into the adjacent coulee, I call a halt at the first stand of chokecherries so the dogs can rest in the shade and drink some water. I'm enjoying the break myself when I glance down the draw and spot Maggie, our older female wirehair, on point beside a dense cluster of brush. Time to start hunting again.

By the time we reach Maggie, Max, our big male, has moved in behind her to honor the

point. Locating birds in such dense, thorny cover is one thing, but getting them airborne is another. Since bird dogs are trained to hold a point without advancing, our only option is for one of us to wade in. I offer to plunge in, suggesting to Lori that she post up in the open on the far side of the brush. I know I'll never get a shot off from the middle of the thicket.

After confirming Lori's position, I unload my shotgun, leave it behind on the ground, and fight through a dozen yards of thorns before wingbeats erupt in front of me. As suspected, I can't even see the

birds, but I can hear Lori shoot twice. "Need a dog?" I yell.

"I need *both* dogs!" she shouts back.

"Fetch!" I call over my shoulder, releasing both wirehairs from their points.

I surmise, correctly, that Lori has killed two young birds of the year, which will be delightful on the table. After praising the dogs and reloading, we head down the sidehill, savoring the satisfaction of having begun another Montana upland season with a plan that, this time at least, worked out. 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: KEITH R. CROWLEY; STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER; NICK FUCCI



## Sharptails on the table

Sharptails are delicious game birds. Yet due to their dark meat, they have acquired an unfortunate—and undeserved, in my opinion—reputation as questionable table fare.

Young, early season birds are especially delectable and best plucked and roasted whole. As the season progresses, sharptail meat becomes darker and more strongly flavored. Some hunters enjoy the distinct taste of a late-season sharptail grilled or sauteed plain with salt and pepper. As for me, I prefer to cut up the meat and use it in stews and stir-fries.

### Basic advice for sharptails whenever they are harvested:

**Field care** Temperatures are often hot during early sharptail season. I don't draw my birds in the field, preferring to wait until I have enough running water to rinse the body cavity thoroughly. However, birds should be cooled down as quickly as possible, which is why I carry an ice chest in my truck. I keep the birds on a rack above the bottom of the chest to prevent them from soak-



A feast in the field

ing in melted ice water.

**Plucking** Skinned meat is fine for many recipes, but birds roasted whole will be moister and tastier with the skin left intact.

**Hanging** This time-honored European tradition will help tenderize birds (or venison, for that matter). I don't hang mine as long as the British do (a week or longer), but I aim for at least two days in cool conditions. When the

air temperature is higher than 60 degrees, I hang my birds in an old refrigerator dedicated to that purpose.

**Brining** Though not necessary, this process increases tenderness and reduces the meat's blood content. I soak the cleaned carcass for

6 to 8 hours in a mixture of ½ cup salt and ½ cup brown sugar per gallon of cold water before cooking. Adding whole peppercorns and several cloves of crushed garlic is optional.

After the soak, rinse thoroughly under running water to remove superficial salt. Dry the birds thoroughly before cooking by blotting with a paper towel and then air drying for several hours at room temperature.

**Cooking** Too much heat for too long ruins more wild game than anything else. Roasting for 25 minutes at 325 degrees is a general guideline for whole sharptails, adjusted for the birds' size and age and the characteristics of the oven or grill. Be sure to use a meat thermometer. Standard domestic poultry recipes call for cooking birds to an internal temperature of 165–170 degrees F., but I aim for 150 degrees with wild birds. ■